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LETTER DATED 23 DECEMBER 1999 FROM THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ADDRESSED TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL

I have the honour to refer to Security Council resolution 1270 (1999) of 22 October 1999 by which the Security Council established the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) with an authorized strength of a maximum of 6,000 military personnel. As I described in my report of 28 September 1999 (S/1999/1003), the Secretariat has made every effort to expedite the deployment of UNAMSIL. A substantial number of UNAMSIL troops, in particular from Ghana, Kenya and India, are already on the ground. The deployment of UNAMSIL is currently expected to be completed in January 2000.

At the same time, the report indicated that the deployment of UNAMSIL at its currently authorized strength was predicated on the continuing presence in Sierra Leone of the Military Observer Group (ECOMOG) of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). In this regard, I had extensive contacts with leaders from the region to impress upon them the need to maintain a sizeable presence of ECOMOG in Sierra Leone to perform the vital functions of providing security at Freetown and the international airport at Lungi, and protecting the Government of Sierra Leone.

In a letter dated 7 December 1999, President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria notified me that his country would be withdrawing its troops from ECOMOG as United Nations troops are deployed in Sierra Leone. In this connection, President Obasanjo informed me that Nigeria could not accept the presence in the same country of two peacekeeping forces under separate commands and operating under different conditions. On 15 December, I had a telephone conversation with President Obasanjo to convey my deep concern about the repercussions which a premature withdrawal of ECOMOG might have on the security situation in Sierra Leone. In particular, I appealed to the President to review his decision to withdraw Nigerian troops from ECOMOG, and asked that their departure be postponed at least until further discussions had taken place between the Government of Nigeria and the United Nations. To this end, I suggested that a high-level military delegation from Nigeria visit United Nations Headquarters. I confirmed these views in a letter dated 16 December 1999 addressed to President Obasanjo. At present, the Nigerian Chief of Army Staff is visiting United Nations Headquarters for discussions on the incorporation of Nigerian units in UNAMSIL and the modalities of the withdrawal of Nigerian troops from ECOMOG.

However, on 21 December 1999, President Obasanjo confirmed to my Special Representative for Sierra Leone, Mr. Oluyemi Adeniji, that Nigeria would gradually withdraw its troops from ECOMOG in the following manner: Nigeria would deploy the two battalions it has pledged to contribute to UNAMSIL and repatriate two of its battalions serving with ECOMOG in the first half of January 2000. By the end of January, two other Nigerian battalions would be withdrawn from ECOMOG. The repatriation of Nigerian troops from Sierra Leone would be completed in February 2000. In addition, I have been informed that the remaining contributors to ECOMOG, Ghana and Guinea, are also preparing to withdraw their troops from ECOMOG as well. This implies that, for all intents and purposes, by the beginning of the new year ECOMOG would be unable to continue performing its vital functions of providing security at Freetown and the international airport at Lungi, and protecting the Government of Sierra Leone. At present, UNAMSIL has neither the mandate nor the means to perform these tasks.

As the Security Council will recall, in paragraph 50 of my report of 28 September (S/1999/1003), I indicated that, in the eventuality of the withdrawal of Nigerian troops, a reassessment would be required of the security conditions in Sierra Leone as it passed through the sensitive process of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration. I also indicated that I would revert to the Security Council with further proposals, addressing the additional tasks for and the possible strengthening of the United Nations force to assume the functions now fulfilled by ECOMOG. In the eventuality of a full withdrawal by ECOMOG, I envisaged that a much stronger United Nations force of about 10 infantry battalions would be required.

I am very much concerned that the repatriation of ECOMOG troops in the immediate future, without adequate security protection provided by other peacekeepers, would create a dangerous security gap in the key areas of Lungi and Freetown. It could also have a negative impact on the maintenance of a climate of confidence, which is crucial to the successful execution of the programme of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of the many Sierra Leonean ex-combatants.

The situation in Sierra Leone continues to pose a threat to peace and security in the region. I therefore recommend that the Security Council authorize, as soon as possible, the expansion of UNAMSIL with the addition of up to four infantry battalions and necessary military support elements. The total strength of an expanded UNAMSIL would thus be close to 10,000 military personnel. I also recommend that the mandate of UNAMSIL be broadened to enable it to assume the functions now performed by ECOMOG, in particular the provision of security at Lungi airport and at key installations, buildings and government institutions in and around Freetown. These new tasks would also require more robust rules of engagement for the entire United Nations force.

It is important that UNAMSIL, through its military capabilities and posture, be able to deter any attempt to derail the Sierra Leonean peace process. The four additional battalions would therefore have to be robustly equipped, including the necessary force multipliers. The additional troops and their equipment should arrive as soon as feasible in Sierra Leone and would therefore have to be transported by air. The expansion of UNAMSIL, as described

above, would also imply a strengthening of its administrative and logistical support capacity.

A more detailed concept of operations for an expanded UNAMSIL and an estimate of the financial costs will be included in my next periodic report to the Security Council on UNAMSIL, which is due on 20 January 2000. In this report, I will also include recommendations concerning the strengthening of the United Nations role in support of the Sierra Leonean police, since the withdrawal of ECOMOG forces is likely to have immediate repercussions on the maintenance of law and order in Sierra Leone in which ECOMOG has been playing an important role.

In the meantime, the Secretariat has initiated planning and discussions with potential contributors on the expeditious deployment, if authorized by the Security Council, of additional troops to UNAMSIL. I am also informing the Government of President Alhaji Ahmad Tejan Kabbah of Sierra Leone of the modalities of the deployment of an expanded UNAMSIL.

As I make these recommendations, I should like to reiterate my deep appreciation for the vital role which ECOMOG has played in bringing peace to Sierra Leone. The international community owes a debt of gratitude to those countries and to the troops who, at high cost and considerable sacrifice, remained alongside the people of Sierra Leone during their darkest hour. Their contribution will not be forgotten.

I should be grateful if you would bring this urgent matter to the attention of the members of the Security Council.

(Signed) Kofi A. ANNAN